

THE DAUGHTER OF THE STORAGE WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

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THE DAUGHTER OF THE STORAGE

By
W. D. HOWELLS



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THE DAUGHTER OF THE STORAGE

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THE STORAGE

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I

THEY were getting some of their things out to send into the country, and Forsyth had left his work to help his wife look them over and decide which to take and which to leave. The things were mostly trunks that they had stored the fall before; there were some tables and Colonial bureaus inherited from his mother, and some mirrors and decorative odds and ends, which they would not want in the furnished house they had taken for the summer. There were some canvases which Forsyth said he would paint out and use for other subjects, but which, when he came to look at again, he found really not so bad. The rest, literally, was nothing but trunks; there were, of course, two or three boxes of books. When they had been packed closely into the five-dollar room,

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with the tables and bureaus and mirrors and canvases and decorative odds and ends put carefully on top, the Forsyths thought the effect very neat, and laughed at themselves for being proud of it.

They spent the winter in Paris planning for the summer in America, and now it had come May, a month which in New York is at its best, and in the Constitutional Storage Safe-Deposit Warehouse is by no means at its worst. The Constitutional Storage is no longer new, but when the Forsyths were among the first to store there it was up to the latest moment in the modern perfections of a safe-deposit warehouse. It was strictly fire-proof; and its long, white, brick-walled, iron-doored corridors, with their clean concrete floors, branching from a central avenue to the tall windows north and south, offered perspectives sculpturesquely bare, or picturesquely heaped with arriving or departing household stuff.

When the Forsyths went to look at it a nice young fellow from the office had gone with them; running ahead and switching on rows of electrics down the corridors, and then, with a wire-basketed electric lamp, which he twirled about and held aloft and a low, showing the dustless, sweet-smelling spaciousness of a perfect five-dollar room. He said it would more than hold their things; and it really held them.

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Now, when the same young fellow unlocked the iron door and set it wide, he said he would get them a man, and he got Mrs. Forsyth a gilt arm-chair from some furniture going into an adjoining twenty-dollar room. She sat down in it, and "Of course," she said, "the pieces I want will be at the very back and the very bottom. Why don't you get yourself a chair, too, Ambrose? What are you looking at?"

With his eyes on the neighboring furniture he answered, "Seems to be the wreck of a millionaire's happy home; parlor and kitchen utensils and office furniture all in white and gold."

"Horrors, yes!" Mrs. Forsyth said, without turning her head from studying her trunks, as if she might divine their contents from their outside.

"Tata and I," her husband said, "are more interested in the millionaire's things." Tata, it appeared, was not a dog, but a child; the name was not the diminutive of her own name, which was Charlotte, but a generic name for a doll, which Tata had learned from her Italian nurse to apply to all little girls and had got applied to herself by her father. She was now at a distance down the corridor, playing a drama with the pieces of millionaire furniture; as they stretched away in variety and splendor they naturally suggested

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personages of princely quality, and being touched with her little forefinger tip were capable of entering warmly into Tata's plans for them.

Her mother looked over her shoulder toward the child. "Come here, Tata," she called, and when Tata, having enjoined some tall mirrors to secrecy with a frown and a shake of the head, ran to her, Mrs. Forsyth had forgotten why she had called her. "Oh!" she said, recollecting, "do you know which your trunk is, Tata? Can you show mamma? Can you put your hand on it?"

The child promptly put her hand on the end of a small box just within her tiptoe reach, and her mother said, "I do believe she knows everything that's in it, Ambrose! That trunk has got to be opened the very first one!"

The man that the young fellow said he would send showed at the far end of the corridor, smaller than human, but enlarging himself to the average Irish bulk as he drew near. He was given instructions and obeyed with caressing irony Mrs. Forsyth's order to pull out Tata's trunk first, and she found the key in a large tangle of keys, and opened it, and had the joy of seeing everything recognized by the owner: doll by doll, cook-stove, tin dishes, small brooms, wooden animals on feet and wheels, birds of various plumage, a toy piano, a dust-pan, alphabet blocks, dog's-eared linen

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Mother Goose books, and the rest. Tata had been allowed to put the things away herself, and she took them out with no apparent sense of the time passed since she saw them last. In the changing life of her parents all times and places were alike to her. She began to play with the things in the storage corridor as if it were yesterday when she saw them last in the flat. Her mother and father left her to them in the distraction of their own trunks. Mrs. Forsyth had these spread over the space toward the window and their lids lifted and tried to decide about them. In the end she had changed the things in them back and forth till she candidly owned that she no longer knew where anything at all was.

As she raised herself for a moment's respite from the problem she saw at the far end of the corridor a lady with two men, who increased in size like her own man as they approached. The lady herself seemed to decrease, though she remained of a magnificence to match the furniture, and looked like it as to her dress of white picked out in gold when she arrived at the twenty-dollar room next the Forsyths'. In her advance she had been vividly played round by a little boy, who ran forward and back and easily doubled the length of the corridor before he came to a stand and remained with his brown eyes fixed on Tata.

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Tata herself had blue eyes, which now hovered dreamily above the things in her trunk.

The two mothers began politely to ignore each other. She of the twenty-dollar room directed the men who had come with her, and in a voice of authority and appeal at once commanded and consulted them in the disposition of her belongings. At the sound of the mixed tones Mrs. Forsyth signaled to her husband, and, when he came within whispering, murmured: “Pittsburg, or Chicago. Did you *ever* hear such a Mid-Western accent!” She pretended to be asking him about repacking the trunk before her, but the other woman was not deceived. She was at least aware of criticism in the air of her neighbors, and she put on greater severity with the workmen. The boy came up and caught her skirt. “What?” she said, bending over. “No, certainly not. I haven’t time to attend to you. Go off and play. Don’t I tell you no? Well, there, then! Will you get that trunk out where I can open it? That small one there,” she said to one of the men, while the other rested for both. She stooped to unlock the trunk and flung up the lid. “Now if you bother me any more I will surely—” But she lost herself short of the threat and began again to seek counsel and issue orders.

The boy fell upon the things in the trunk, which

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were the things of a boy, as those in Tata's trunk were the things of a girl, and to run with them, one after another, to Tata and to pile them in gift on the floor beside her trunk. He did not stop running back and forth as fast as his short, fat legs could carry him till he had reached the bottom of his box, chattering constantly and taking no note of the effect with Tata. Then, as she made no response whatever to his munificence, he began to be abashed and to look pathetically from her to her father.

"Oh, really, young man," Forsyth said, "we can't let you impoverish yourself at this rate. What have you said to your benefactor, Tata? What are you going to give *him*?"

The children did not understand his large words, but they knew he was affectionately mocking them.

"Ambrose," Mrs. Forsyth said, "you mustn't let him."

"I'm trying to think how to hinder him, but it's rather late," Forsyth answered, and then the boy's mother joined in.

"Indeed, indeed, if you can, it's more than I can. You're just worrying the little girl," she said to the boy.

"Oh no, he isn't, dear little soul," Mrs. Forsyth said, leaving her chair and going up to the two

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children. She took the boy's hand in hers. "What a kind boy! But you know my little girl mustn't take all your playthings. If you'll give her *one* she'll give *you* one, and that will be enough. You can both play with them all for the present." She referred her suggestion to the boy's mother, and the two ladies met at the invisible line dividing the five-dollar room from the twenty-dollar room.

"Oh yes, indeed," the Mid-Westerner said, willing to meet the New-Yorker half-way. "You're taking things out, I see. I hardly know which is the worst: taking out or putting in."

"Well, we are just completing the experience," Mrs. Forsyth said. "I shall be able to say better how I feel in half an hour."

"You don't mean this is the first time you've stored? I suppose *we've* been in and out of storage twenty times. Not in this warehouse exactly; we've never been here before."

"It seems very nice," Mrs. Forsyth suggested.

"They all do at the beginning. I suppose if we ever came to the end they would seem nicer still. Mr. Bream's business is always taking him away" (it appeared almost instantly that he was the international inspector of a great insurance company's agencies in Europe and South America), "and when I don't go with him it seems easier

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to break up and go into a hotel than to go on housekeeping. I don't know that it is, though," she questioned. "It's so hard to know what to do with the child in a hotel."

"Yes, but he seems the sort that you could manage with anywhere," Mrs. Forsyth agreed and disagreed.

His mother looked at him where he stood beaming upon Tata and again joyfully awaiting some effect with her. But the child sat back upon her small heels with her eyes fixed on the things in her trunk and made no sign of having seen the heaps of his gifts.

The Forsyths had said to each other before this that their little girl was a queer child, and now they were not so much ashamed of her apparent selfishness or rude indifference as they thought they were. They made a joke of it with the boy's mother, who said she did not believe Tata was anything but shy. She said she often told Mr. Bream that she did wish Peter—yes, that was his name; she didn't like it much, but it was his grandfather's; was Tata a Christian name? Oh, just a pet name! Well, it *was* pretty—could be broken of *his* ridiculous habit; most children—little boys, that was—held onto their things so.

Forsyth would have taken something from Tata and given it to Peter; but his wife would

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not let him; and he had to content himself with giving Peter a pencil of his own that drew red at one end and blue at the other, and that at once drew a blue boy, that looked like Peter, on the pavement. He told Peter not to draw a boy now, but wait till he got home, and then be careful not to draw a blue boy with the red end. He helped him put his things back into his trunk, and Peter seemed to enjoy that, too.

Tata, without rising from her seat on her heels, watched the restitution with her dreamy eyes; she paid no attention to the blue boy on the pavement; pictures from her father were nothing new to her. The mothers parted with expressions of mutual esteem in spite of their difference of accent and fortune. Mrs. Forsyth asked if she might not kiss Peter, and did so; he ran to his mother and whispered to her; then he ran back and gave Tata so great a hug that she fell over from it.

Tata did not cry, but continued as if lost in thought which she could not break from, and that night, after she had said her prayers with her mother, her mother thought it was time to ask her: "Tata, dear, why did you act so to that boy to-day? Why didn't you give him something of yours when he brought you all his things? Why did you act so oddly?"

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Tata said something in a voice so low that her mother could not make it out.

“What did you say?”

“I couldn’t tell which,” the child still whispered; but now her mother’s ear was at her lips.

“How, which?”

“To give him. The more I looked,” and the whisper became a quivering breath, “the more I couldn’t tell which. And I wanted to give them *all* to him, but I couldn’t tell whether it would be right, because you and papa gave them to me for birthday and Christmas,” and the quivering breath broke into a sobbing grief, so that the mother had to catch the child up to her heart.

“Dear little tender conscience!” she said, still wiping her eyes when she told the child’s father, and they fell into a sweet, serious talk about her before they slept. “And I was ashamed of her before that woman! I know she misjudged her; but *we* ought to have remembered how fine and precious she is, and *known* how she must have suffered, trying to decide.”

“Yes, conscience,” the father said. “And temperament, the temperament to which decision is martyrdom.”

“And she will always have to be deciding! She’ll have to decide for you, some day, as I

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do now; you are very undecided, Ambrose—she gets it from you."

II

The Forsyths were afraid that Tata might want to offer Peter some gift in reparation the next morning, and her father was quite ready, if she said so, to put off their leaving town, and go with her to the Constitutional Storage, which was the only address of Mrs. Bream that he knew. But the child had either forgotten or she was contented with her mother's comforting, and no longer felt remorse.

One does not store the least of one's personal or household gear without giving a hostage to storage, a pledge of allegiance impossible to break. No matter how few things one puts in, one never takes everything out; one puts more things in. Mrs. Forsyth went to the warehouse with Tata in the fall before they sailed for another winter in Paris, and added some old bits she had picked up at farm-houses in their country drives, and they filled the room quite to the top. She told her husband how Tata had entered into the spirit of putting back her trunk of playthings with the hope of seeing it again in the spring; and she added that she had now had to take a seven-fifty

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room without consulting him, or else throw away the things they had brought home.

During the ten or twelve years that followed, the Forsyths sometimes spent a whole winter in a hotel; sometimes they had a flat; sometimes they had a separate dwelling. If their housing was ample, they took almost everything out of storage; once they got down to a two-dollar bin, and it seemed as if they really were leaving the storage altogether. Then, if they went into a flat that was nearly all studio, their furniture went back in a cataclysmal wave to the warehouse, where a ten-dollar room, a twelve-dollar room, would not dam the overflow.

Tata, who had now outgrown her pet name, and was called Charlotte because her mother felt she ought to be, always went with her to the storage to help look the things over, to see the rooms emptied down to a few boxes, or replenished to bursting. In the first years she played about, close to her mother; as she grew older she ventured further, and began to make friends with other little girls who had come with their mothers. It was quite safe socially to be in the Constitutional Storage; it gave standing; and Mrs. Forsyth fearlessly chanced acquaintance with these mothers, who would sometimes be there whole long mornings or afternoons, taking trunks out or

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putting them in. With the trunks set into the corridors and opened for them, they would spend the hours looking the contents over, talking to their neighbors, or rapt in long silences when they hesitated with things held off or up, and, after gazing absently at them, putting them back again. Sometimes they varied the process by laying things aside for sending home, and receipting for them at the office as "goods selected."

They were mostly hotel people or apartment people, as Mrs. Forsyth oftenest was herself, but sometimes they were separate - house people. Among these there was one family, not of great rank or wealth, but distinguished, as lifelong New-Yorkers, in a world of comers and goers of every origin. Mrs. Forsyth especially liked them for a certain quality, but what this quality was she could not very well say. They were a mother with two daughters, not quite old maids, but on the way to it, and there was very intermittently the apparently bachelor brother of the girls; at the office Mrs. Forsyth verified her conjecture that he was some sort of minister. One could see they were all gentlefolks, though the girls were not of the last cry of fashion. They were very nice to their mother, and you could tell that they must have been coming with her for years.

At this point in her study of them for her

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husband's amusement she realized that Charlotte had been coming to the storage with her nearly all her life, and that more and more the child had taken charge of the uneventful inspection of the things. She was shocked to think that she had let this happen, and now she commanded her husband to say whether Charlotte would grow into a storage old maid like those good girls.

Forsyth said, Probably not before her time; but he allowed it was a point to be considered.

Very well, then, Mrs. Forsyth said, the child should never go again; that was all. She had strongly confirmed herself in this resolution when one day she not only let the child go again, but she let her go alone. The child was now between seventeen and eighteen, rather tall, grave, pretty, with the dull brown hair that goes so well with dreaming blue eyes, and of a stiff grace. She had not come out yet, because she had always been out, handing cakes at her father's studio teas long before she could remember not doing it, and later pouring for her mother with rather a quelling air as she got toward fifteen. During these years the family had been going and coming between Europe and America; they did not know perfectly why, except that it was easier than not.

More and more there was a peculiarity in the

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goods selected by Charlotte for sending home, which her mother one day noted. "How is it, Charlotte, that you always send exactly the things I want, and when you get your own things here you don't know whether they are what you wanted or not?"

"Because I don't know when I send them. I don't choose them; I can't."

"But you choose the right things for me?"

"No, I don't, mother. I just take what comes first, and you always like it."

"Now, that is nonsense, Charlotte. I can't have you telling me such a thing as that. It's an insult to my intelligence. Do you think I don't know my own mind?"

"I don't know *my* mind," the girl said, so persistently, obstinately, stubbornly, that her mother did not pursue the subject for fear of worse.

She referred it to her husband, who said: "Perhaps it's like poets never being able to remember their own poetry. I've heard it's because they have several versions in their minds when they write and can't remember which they've written. Charlotte has several choices in her mind, and can't choose between her choices."

"Well, we ought to have broken her of her indecision. Some day it will make her very unhappy."

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“Pretty hard to break a person of her temperament,” Forsyth suggested.

“I know it!” his wife admitted, with a certain pleasure in realizing the fact. “I don’t know what we *shall* do.”

III

Storage society was almost wholly feminine; in rare instances there was a man who must have been sent in dearth of women or in an hour of their disability. Then the man came hastily, with a porter, and either pulled all the things out of the rooms so that he could honestly say he had seen them, and that the thing wanted was not there; or else merely had the doors opened, and after a glance inside resolved to wait till his wife, or mother, or daughter could come. He agreed in guilty eagerness with the workmen that this was the only way.

The exception to the general rule was a young man who came one bright spring morning when all nature suggested getting one’s stuff out and going into the country, and had the room next the Forsyths’ original five-dollar room opened. As it happened, Charlotte was at the moment visiting this room upon her mother’s charge to see whether certain old scrim sash-curtains, which

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they had not needed for ages but at last simply *must* have, were not lurking there in a chest of general curtainings. The Forsyths now had rooms on other floors, but their main room was at the end of the corridor branching northward from that where the five-dollar room was. Near this main room that nice New York family had their rooms, and Charlotte had begun the morning in their friendly neighborhood, going through some chests that might perhaps have the general curtainings in them and the scrim curtains among the rest. It had not, and she had gone to what the Forsyths called their old ancestral five-dollar room, where that New York family continued to project a sort of wireless chaperonage over her. But the young man had come with a porter, and, with her own porter, Charlotte could not feel that even a wireless chaperonage was needed, though the young man approached with the most beaming face she thought she had ever seen, and said he hoped he should not be in her way. She answered with a sort of helpless reverberation of his glow, Not at all; she should only be a moment. She wanted to say she hoped she would not be in *his* way, but she saved herself in time, while, with her own eyes intent upon the façade of her room and her mind trying to lose itself in the question which curtain-trunk

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the scrims might be in, she kept the sense of his sweet eyes, the merriest eyes she had ever seen, effulgent with good-will and apology and reverent admiration. She blushed to think it admiration, though she liked to think it so, and she did not snub him when the young man jumped about, neglecting his own storage, and divining the right moments for his offers of help. She saw that he was a little shorter than herself, that he was very light and quick on his feet, and had a round, brown face, clean-shaven, and a round, brown head, close shorn, from which in the zeal of his attentions to her he had shed his straw hat onto the window-sill. He formed a strong contrast to the contents of his store-room, which was full, mainly, of massive white furniture picked out in gold, and very blond. He said casually that it had been there, off and on, since long before he could remember, and at these words an impression, vague, inexplicable, deepened in Charlotte's mind.

“Mother,” she said, for she had now disused the earlier “mamma” in deference to modern usage, “how old was I when we first took that five-dollar room?”

She asked this question after she had shown the scrim curtains she had found and brought home with her.

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“Why? I don’t know. Two or three; three or four. I should have to count up. What makes you ask?”

“Can a person recollect what happened when they were three or four?”

“I should say not, decidedly.”

“Or recollect a face?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then of course it wasn’t. Mother, do you remember ever telling me what the little boy was like who gave me all his playthings and I couldn’t decide what to give him back?”

“What a question! Of course not! He was very brown and funny, with the beamingest little face in the world. Rather short for his age, I should say, though I haven’t the least idea what his age was.”

“Then it was the very same little boy!” Charlotte said.

“Who was the very same little boy?” her mother demanded.

“The one that was there to-day; the young man, I mean,” Charlotte explained, and then she told what had happened with a want of fullness which her mother’s imagination supplied.

“Did he say who he was? Is he coming back to-morrow or this afternoon? Did you inquire who he was or where?”

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“What an idea, mother!” Charlotte said, grouping the several impossibilities under one head in her answer.

“You had a perfect right to know, if you thought he was the one.”

“But I didn’t *think* he was the one, and I don’t *know* that he is now; and if he was, what could I do about it?”

“That is true,” Mrs. Forsyth owned. “But it’s very disappointing. I’ve always felt as if they ought to know it was your undecidedness and not ungenerousness.”

Charlotte laughed a little forlornly, but she only said, “Really, mother!”

Mrs. Forsyth was still looking at the curtains. “Well, these are not the scrims I wanted. You must go back. I believe I will go with you. The sooner we have it over the better,” she added, and she left the undecided Charlotte to decide whether she meant the scrim curtains or the young man’s identity.

It was very well, for one reason, that she decided to go with Charlotte that afternoon. The New-Yorkers must have completed the inspection of their trunks, for they had not come back. Their failure to do so was the more important because the young man had come back and was actively superintending the unpacking of his room. The

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palatial furniture had all been ranged up and down the corridor, and as fast as a trunk was got out and unlocked he went through it with the help of the storage-men, listed its contents in a note-book with a number, and then transferred the number and a synopsis of the record to a tag and fastened it to the trunk, which he had put back into the room.

When the Forsyths arrived with the mistaken scrim curtains, he interrupted himself with apologies for possibly being in their way; and when Mrs. Forsyth said he was not at all in their way, he got white-and-gold arm-chairs for her and Charlotte and put them so conveniently near the old ancestral room that Mrs. Forsyth scarcely needed to move hand or foot in letting Charlotte restore the wrong curtains and search the chests for the right ones. His politeness made way for conversation and for the almost instant exchange of confidences between himself and Mrs. Forsyth, so that Charlotte was free to enjoy the silence to which they left her in her labors.

“Before I say a word,” Mrs. Forsyth said, after saying some hundreds in their mutual inculpation and exculpation, “I want to ask something, and I hope you will excuse it to an old woman’s curiosity and not think it rude.”

At the words “old woman’s” the young man

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gave a protesting "Oh!" and at the word "rude" he said, "Not at all."

"It is simply this: how long have your things been here? I ask because we've had this room thirteen or fourteen years, and I've never seen your room opened in that whole time."

The young man laughed joyously. "Because it hasn't been opened in that whole time. I was a little chap of three or four bothering round here when my mother put the things in; I believe it was a great frolic for me, but I'm afraid it wasn't for her. I've been told that my activities contributed to the confusion of the things and the things in them that she's been in ever since, and I'm here now to make what reparation I can by listing them."

"She'll find it a great blessing," Mrs. Forsyth said. "I wish we had ours listed. I suppose you remember it all very vividly. It must have been a great occasion for you seeing the things stored at that age."

The young man beamed upon her. "Not so great as now, I'm afraid. The fact is, I don't remember anything about it. But I've been told that I embarrassed with my personal riches a little girl who was looking over her doll's things."

"Oh, indeed!" Mrs. Forsyth said, stiffly, and she turned rather snubbingly from him and said,

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coldly, to Charlotte: "I think they are in that green trunk. Have you the key?" and, stooping as her daughter stooped, she whispered, "Really!" in condemnation and contempt.

Charlotte showed no signs of sharing either, and Mrs. Forsyth could not very well manage them alone. So when Charlotte said, "No, I haven't the key, mother," and the young man burst in with, "Oh, do let me try my master-key; it will unlock anything that isn't a Yale," Mrs. Forsyth sank back enthroned and the trunk was thrown open.

She then forgot what she had wanted it opened for. Charlotte said, "They're not here, mother," and her mother said, "No, I didn't suppose they were," and began to ask the young man about his mother. It appeared that his father had died twelve years before, and since then his mother and he had been nearly everywhere except at home, though mostly in England; now they had come home to see where they should go next or whether they should stay.

"That would never suit my daughter," Mrs. Forsyth lugged in, partly because the talk had gone on away from her family as long as she could endure, and partly because Charlotte's indecision always amused her. "She can't bear to choose."

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“Really?” the young man said. “I don’t know whether I like it or not, but I have had to do a lot of it. You mustn’t think, though, that I chose this magnificent furniture. My father bought an Italian palace once, and as we couln’t live in it or move it we brought the furniture here.”

“It *is* magnificent,” Mrs. Forsyth said, looking down the long stretches of it and eying and fingering her specific throne. “I wish my husband could see it—I don’t believe he remembers it from fourteen years ago. It looks—excuse me!—very studio.”

“Is he a painter? Not Mr. Forsyth the painter?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Forsyth eagerly admitted, but wondering how he should know her name, without reflecting that a score of trunk-tags proclaimed it and that she had acquired his by like means.

“I like his things so much,” he said. “I thought his three portraits were the best things in the Salon last year.”

“Oh, you *saw* them?” Mrs. Forsyth laughed with pleasure and pride. “Then,” as if it necessarily followed, “you must come to us some Sunday afternoon. You’ll find a number of his new portraits and some of the subjects; they like to see themselves framed.” She tried for a card in her hand-bag, but she had none, and she

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said, "Have you one of my cards, my dear?" Charlotte had, and rendered it up with a severity lost upon her for the moment. She held it toward him. "It's Mr. *Peter Bream?*" she smiled upon him, and he beamed back.

"Did you remember it from our first meeting?"

In their cab Mrs. Forsyth said, "I don't know whether he's what you call rather fresh or not, Charlotte, and I'm not sure that I've been very wise. But he *is* so nice, and he looked so *glad* to be asked."

Charlotte did not reply at once, and her silent severity came to the surface of her mother's consciousness so painfully that it was rather a relief to have her explode, "Mother, I will thank you not to discuss my temperament with people."

She gave Mrs. Forsyth her chance, and her mother was so happy in being able to say, "I won't—your *temper*, my dear," that she could add with sincere apology: "I'm sorry I vexed you, and I won't do it again."

IV

The next day was Sunday; Peter Bream took it for some Sunday, and came to the tea on Mrs. Forsyth's generalized invitation. She pulled her mouth down and her eyebrows up when his card

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was brought in, but as he followed hard she made a lightning change to a smile and gave him a hand of cordial welcome. Charlotte had no choice but to welcome him, too, and so the matter was simple for her. She was pouring, as usual, for her mother, who liked to eliminate herself from set duties and walk round among the actual portraits in fact and in frame and talk about them to the potential portraits. Peter, qualified by long sojourn in England, at once pressed himself into the service of handing about the curate's assistant; Mrs. Forsyth electrically explained that it was one of the first brought to New York, and that she had got it at the Stores in London fifteen years before, and it had often been in the old ancestral room, and was there on top of the trunks that first day. She did not recur to the famous instance of Charlotte's infant indecision, and Peter was safe from a snub when he sat down by the girl's side and began to make her laugh. At the end, when her mother asked Charlotte what they had been laughing about, she could not tell; she said she did not know they were laughing.

The next morning Mrs. Forsyth was paying for her Sunday tea with a Monday headache, and more things must be got out for the country. Charlotte had again no choice but to go alone to the storage, and yet again no choice but to be

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pleasant to Peter when she found him next door listing the contents of his mother's trunks and tagging them as before. He dropped his work and wanted to help her. Suddenly they seemed strangely well acquainted, and he pretended to be asked which pieces she should put aside as goods selected, and chose them for her. She hinted that he was shirking his own work; he said it was an all-summer's job, but he knew her mother was in a hurry. He found the little old trunk of her playthings, and got it down and opened it and took out some toys as goods selected. She made him put them back, but first he catalogued everything in it and synopsized the list on a tag and tagged the trunk. He begged for a broken doll which he had not listed, and Charlotte had so much of her original childish difficulty in parting with that instead of something else that she refused it.

It came lunch-time, and he invited her to go out to lunch with him; and when she declined with dignity he argued that if they went to the Woman's Exchange she would be properly chaperoned by the genius of the place; besides, it was the only place in town where you got real strawberry shortcake. She was ashamed of liking it all; he besought her to let him carry her handbag for her, and, as he already had it, she could not prevent him; she did not know, really, how

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far she might successfully forbid him in anything. At the street door of the apartment-house they found her mother getting out of a cab, and she asked Peter in to lunch; so that Charlotte might as well have lunched with him at the Woman's Exchange.

At all storage warehouses there is a season in autumn when the corridors are heaped with the incoming furniture of people who have decided that they cannot pass another winter in New York and are breaking up housekeeping to go abroad indefinitely. But in the spring, when the Constitutional Safe-Deposit offered ample space for thoughtful research, the meetings of Charlotte and Peter could recur without more consciousness of the advance they were making toward the fated issue than in so many encounters at tea or luncheon or dinner. Mrs. Forsyth was insisting on rather a drastic overhauling of her storage that year. Some of the things, by her command, were shifted to and fro between the more modern rooms and the old ancestral room, and Charlotte had to verify the removals. In deciding upon goods selected for the country she had the help of Peter, and she helped him by interposing some useful hesitations in the case of things he had put aside from his mother's possessions to be sold for her by the warehouse people.

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One day he came late and told Charlotte that his mother had suddenly taken her passage for England, and they were sailing the next morning. He said, as if it logically followed, that he had been in love with her from that earliest time when she would not give him the least of her possessions, and now he asked her if she would not promise him the greatest. She did not like what she felt "rehearsed" in his proposal; it was not her idea of a proposal, which ought to be spontaneous and unpremeditated in terms; at the same time, she resented his precipitation, which she could not deny was inevitable.

She perceived that they were sitting side by side on two of those white-and-gold thrones, and she summoned an indignation with the absurdity in refusing him. She rose and said that she must go; that she must be going; that it was quite time for her to go; and she would not let him follow her to the elevator, as he made some offer of doing, but left him standing among his palatial furniture like a prince in exile.

By the time she reached home she had been able to decide that she must tell her mother at once. Her mother received the fact of Peter's proposal with such transport that she did not realize the fact of Charlotte's refusal. When this was connoted to her she could scarcely keep her

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temper within the bounds of maternal tenderness. She said she would have nothing more to do with such a girl; that there was but one such pearl as Peter in the universe, and for Charlotte to throw him away like that! Was it because she could not decide? Well, it appeared that she could decide wrong quickly enough when it came to the point. Would she leave it now to her mother?

That Charlotte would not do, but what she did do was to write a letter to Peter taking him back as much as rested with her; but delaying so long in posting it, when it was written, that it reached him among the letters sent on board and supplementarily delivered by his room steward after all the others when the ship had sailed. The best Peter could do in response was a jubilant Marconigram of unequaled cost and comprehensiveness.

His mother had meant to return in the fall, after her custom, to find out whether she wished to spend the winter in New York or not. Before the date for her sailing she fell sick, and Peter came sadly home alone in the spring. Mrs. Bream's death brought Mrs. Forsyth a vain regret; she was sorry now that she had seen so little of Mrs. Bream; Peter's affection for her was beautiful and spoke worlds for both of them; and they, the Forsyths, must do what they could to comfort him.

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Charlotte felt the pathos of his case peculiarly when she went to make provision for goods selected for the summer from the old ancestral room, and found him forlorn among his white-and-gold furniture next door. He complained that he had no association with it except the touching fact of his mother's helplessness with it, which he had now inherited. The contents of the trunks were even less intimately of his experience; he had performed a filial duty in listing their contents, which long antedated him, and consisted mostly of palatial bric-à-brac and the varied spoils of travel.

He cheered up, however, in proposing to her that they should buy a Castle in Spain and put them into it. The fancy pleased her, but visibly she shrank from a step which it involved, so that he was, as it were, forced to say, half jokingly, half ruefully, "I can imagine your not caring for this rubbish or what became of it, Charlotte, but what about the owner?"

"The owner?" she asked, as it were somnambulantly.

"Yes. Marrying him, say, sometime soon."

"Oh, Peter, I couldn't."

"Couldn't? You know that's not playing the game exactly."

"Yes; but not—not right away?"

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“Well, I don’t know much about it in my own case, but isn’t it usual to fix some approximate date? When should you think?”

“Oh, Peter, I *can’t* think.”

“Will you let me fix it? I must go West and sell out and pull up, you know, preparatory to never going again. We can fix the day now or we can fix it when I come back.”

“Oh, when you come back,” she entreated so eagerly that Peter said:

“Charlotte, let me ask you one thing. Were you ever sorry you wrote me that taking-back letter?”

“Why, Peter, you know how I am. When I have decided something I have undecided it. That’s all.”

From gay he turned to grave. “I ought to have thought. I haven’t been fair; *I* haven’t played the game. I ought to have given you another chance; and I haven’t, have I?”

“Why, I suppose a girl can always change,” Charlotte said, suggestively.

“Yes, but you won’t always be a girl. I’ve never asked you if you wanted to change. I ask you now. Do you?”

“How can I tell? Hadn’t we better let it go as it is? Only not hurry about—about—marrying?”

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“Certainly not hurry about marrying. I’ve wondered that a girl could make up her mind to marry any given man. Haven’t you ever wished that you had not made up your mind about me?”

“Hundreds of times. But I don’t know that I meant anything by it.”

He took her hand from where it lay in her lap as again she sat on one of the white-and-gold thrones beside him and gently pressed it. “Well, then, let’s play we have never been engaged. I’m going West to-night to settle things up for good, and I won’t be back for three or four months, and when I come back we’ll start new. I’ll ask you, and you shall say yes or no just as if you had never said either before.”

“Peter, when you talk like that!” She saw his brown, round face dimly through her wet eyes, and she wanted to hug him for pity of him and pride in him, but she could not decide to do it. They went out to lunch at the Woman’s Exchange, and the only regret Peter had was that it was so long past the season of strawberry shortcake, and that Charlotte seemed neither to talk nor to listen; she ought to have done one or the other.

They had left the Vaneckens busy with their summer trunks at the far end of the northward corridor, where their wireless station had been re-established for Charlotte’s advantage, though

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she had not thought of it the whole short morning long. When she came back from lunch the Vaneckens were just brushing away the crumbs of theirs, which the son and brother seemed to have brought in for them in a paper box; at any rate, he was now there, making believe to help them.

Mrs. Forsyth had promised to come, but she came so late in the afternoon that she owned she had been grudgingly admitted at the office, and she was rather indignant about it. By this time, without having been West for three months, Peter had asked a question which had apparently never been asked before, and Charlotte had as newly answered it. "And now, mother," she said, while Mrs. Forsyth passed from indignant to exultant, "I want to be married right away, before Peter changes his mind about taking me West with him. Let us go home at once. You always said I should have a home wedding."

"What a ridiculous idea!" Mrs. Forsyth said, more to gain time than anything else. She added, "Everything is at sixes and sevens in the flat. There wouldn't be standing-room." A sudden thought flashed upon her, which, because it was sudden and in keeping with her character, she put into tentative words. "You're more at home *here* than anywhere else. You were almost born

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here. You've played about here ever since you were a child. You first met Peter here. He proposed to you here, and you rejected him here. He's proposed here again, and you've accepted him, you say—”

“Mother!” Charlotte broke in terribly upon her. “Are you suggesting that I should be married in a storage warehouse? Well, I haven't fallen quite so low as that yet. If I can't have a *home* wedding, I will have a *church* wedding, and I will wait till doomsday for it if necessary.”

“I don't know about doomsday,” Mrs. Forsyth said, “but as far as to-day is concerned, it's too late for a church wedding. Peter, isn't there something about canonical hours? And isn't it past them?”

“That's in the Episcopal Church,” Peter said, and then he asked, very politely, “Will you excuse me for a moment?” and walked away as if he had an idea. It was apparently to join the Vaneckens, who stood in a group at the end of their corridor, watching the restoration of the trunks which they had been working over the whole day. He came back with Mr. Vanecken and Mr. Vanecken's mother. He was smiling radiantly, and they amusedly.

“It's all right,” he explained. “Mr. Vanecken is a Presbyterian minister, and he will marry us now.”

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“But not here!” Charlotte cried, feeling herself weaken.

“No, certainly not,” the dominie reassured her. “I know a church in the next block that I can borrow for the occasion. But what about the license?”

It was in the day before the parties must both make application in person, and Peter took a paper from his breast pocket. “I thought it might be needed, sometime, and I got it on the way up, this morning.”

“Oh, how thoughtful of you, Peter!” Mrs. Forsyth moaned in admiration otherwise inexpressible, and the rest laughed, even Charlotte, who laughed hysterically. At the end of the corridor they met the Misses Vanecken waiting for them, unobtrusively expectant, and they all went down in the elevator together. Just as they were leaving the building, which had the air of hurrying them out, Mrs. Forsyth had an inspiration. “Good heavens!” she exclaimed, and then, in deference to Mr. Vanecken, said, “Good gracious, I *mean*. My husband! Peter, go right into the office and telephone Mr. Forsyth.”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Vanecken said, “I had better go and see about having my friend’s church opened, in the meanwhile, and—”

“By all means!” Mrs. Forsyth said from her mood of universal approbation.

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But Mr. Vanecken came back looking rather queer and crestfallen. "I find my friend has gone into the country for a few days; and I don't quite like to get the sexton to open the church without his authority, and— But New York is full of churches, and we can easily find another, with a little delay, if—"

He looked at Peter, who looked at Charlotte, who burst out with unprecedented determination. "No, we can't wait. I shall never marry Peter if we do. Mother, you are right. But *must* it be in the old ancestral five-dollar room?"

They all laughed except Charlotte, who was more like crying.

"Certainly not," Mr. Vanecken said. "I've no doubt the manager—"

He never seemed to end his sentences, and he now left this one broken off while he penetrated the railing which fenced in the manager alone among a group of vacated desks, frowning impatient. At some murmured words from the dominie, he shouted, "What!" and then came out radiantly smiling, and saying, "Why, certainly." He knew all the group as old storers in the Constitutional, and called them each by name as he shook them each by the hand. "Everything else has happened here, and I don't see why this shouldn't. Come right into the reception-room."

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With some paintings of biblical subjects, unclaimed from the storage, on the walls, the place had a religious effect, and the manager significantly looked out of it a lingering stenographer, who was standing before a glass with two hatpins crossed in her mouth preparatory to thrusting them through the straw. She withdrew, visibly curious and reluctant, and then the manager offered to withdraw himself.

“No,” Charlotte said, surprisingly initiative in these junctures, “I don’t know how it is in Mr. Vanecken’s church, but, if father doesn’t come, perhaps you’ll have to give me away. At any rate, you’re an old friend of the family, and I should be hurt if you didn’t stay.”

She laid her hand on the manager’s arm, and just as he had protestingly and politely consented, her father arrived in a taxicab, rather grumbling from having been obliged to cut short a sitting. When it was all over, and the Vaneckens were eliminated, when, in fact, the Breams had joined the Forsyths at a wedding dinner which the bride’s father had given them at Delmonico’s and had precipitated themselves into a train for Niagara (“So banal,” Mrs. Forsyth said, “but I suppose they had to go somewhere, and *we* went to Niagara, come to think of it, and it’s on their way West”), the bride’s mother remained up late talking it

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all over. She took credit to herself for the whole affair, and gave herself a great deal of just praise. But when she said, "I do believe, if it hadn't been for me, at the last, Charlotte would never have made up her mind," Forsyth demurred.

"I should say Peter had a good deal to do with making up her mind for her."

"Yes, you might say that."

"And for once in her life Charlotte seems to have had her mind ready for making up."

"Yes, you might say that, too. I believe she is going to turn out a decided character, after all. I *never* saw anybody so determined not to be married in a storage warehouse."

